OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN: CULTURAL CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM

by Lisa Delpit
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Let me begin by telling you a little about the Boston Public Schools, where I have worked closely with teachers, administrators, and parents since 1979. There are 64,000 students, and 80% of them are African-American, Hispanic, Asian, or Caribbean. Bilingual programs are offered in ten languages — Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Chinese, Greek, Haitian Creole, Laotian, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

Last year, an initiative was launched to work with the increasing number of new arrivals who have no literacy in any language — refugees from famine and civil war in Somalia, children who grew up in the camps in Laos and Cambodia, Haitian children who had no opportunity to attend school where they were born. Family dislocation and poverty have an increasing impact on schooling: 20% of white children, 33% of black children, and 75% of Hispanic children in Boston live below the poverty line.

In contrast to the student population of the Boston schools, almost 60% of the city’s overall population is white, and the teaching force is largely white, English-speaking, and middle class. Most non-white teachers are African-American, and they routinely teach classes made up of Hispanic, Haitian, and Asian children. Interactions across racial, linguistic, cultural and class lines are the daily stuff of teaching and learning. In this respect, Boston is no different than many small or large city school systems in the United States; significant differences between those teaching and those taught are increasingly appearing in suburban and rural systems as well. More and more, our schools are places where teachers and students are unalike in important ways, places where teachers educate “other people’s children.”

At the same time, as one of the wisest educators I know is fond of reminding me, “Parents send us their best children every day. They don’t have another set that they’re keeping at home.” And teachers and administrators, working harder than ever before, longer than ever before, are in the vast majority professional, caring, and of good will. For me, these are the educational realities that Lisa Delpit is addressing in Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom.

The volume collects between a single set of covers nine of Delpit’s essays and book chapters dealing with various aspects of cultural diversity in education, making easily available important work published between 1986 and 1993. Delpit has added a brief but pointed overall introduction and short prefaces to each of the book’s three sections: “Controversies Revisited,” “Lessons From Home and Abroad,” and “Looking to the Future.”

Reviewed by

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Joseph Check is director of the Boston Writing Project and teaches at the Institute for Learning and Teaching at the University of Massachusetts.
In these essays Delpit attempts to crystallize and respond to a basic realization concerning sources of cultural conflict in the classroom: "We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don’t even know they exist? Indeed, many of us don’t even realize that our own worlds exist only in our heads and in the cultural institutions we have built to support them." Behind this realization is an urgent question — ‘What are we really doing to better educate poor children and children of color?’ — and Delpit’s response, which suggests a new definition of “the basics” and raises hard questions for current school reform efforts:

The book begins with three essays which Delpit labels “Controversies Revisited.” Many readers already familiar with her work will immediately recognize two essays from the 1980’s which caused extensive debate, particularly in language arts/English circles. These are “Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator” and “The Silenced Dialogue.” According to Delpit, “These two articles, considered as a set, are among the twenty articles that received the most requests for reprints in the history of the Harvard Educational Review. Even though they were published in 1986 and 1988, the controversies surrounding them continue.”

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“Skills and Other Dilemmas…” was an attempt to “lay out my concerns with the writing project movement and to detail the frustrations many teachers of color felt at being excluded from educational dialogue — in this case, the dialogue about literacy instruction.” When it appeared, she was “unprepared for the intense interest and controversy it generated. Writing project members across the country were incensed. Despite my attempts to say that we must not abandon the very good ideas of the process approach, but must be open to modification based on the voices of parents and educators of color, they perceived me as unequivocally attacking their work. Many African Americans, on the other hand, told me I had made public beliefs they thought no one else shared…. .” The third article in this section, “Language Diversity and Learning,” is an intentional and successful effort by Delpit to put forward a less emotionally charged version of her views in this area, to “make explicit the balance I actually advocate.” She feels it necessary to do so because:

Explicitly stated in both earlier articles is the caveat that neither position — neither skills nor process, liberal nor conservative — is sufficient in and of itself, yet many educators insist on dichotomizing my ideas, making me a proponent or detractor of one or another perspective. . . . I do not demand, as one white academic said, that children of color give up what they are to become something else. Nor do I, as he continued, ‘reject the concept that liberation for poor kids and linguistic minorities starts with accepting their culture and language and helping them to build on it.’ Indeed, that is what I do advocate.

As two of these three articles have seen frequent, heated discussion for almost ten years, what more can now profitably be said? I can offer my own brief responses, as one who has regularly used all three of these articles in work with experienced educators, prospective teachers, and community members. To balance my own views, I have included short responses from two other
thoughtful readers, one a suburban administrator and one an urban teacher.

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First, it is clear that the basic question raised in the opening paragraph of “Skills and Other Dilemmas” is still very much with us: “Why do the refrains of progressive educational movements seem lacking in ... the shades of tone expected in a truly heterogeneous chorus? Why do we hear so little representation from the multicultural voices which comprise the present-day American educational scene?”

Delpit’s voice has been and continues to be a vital, essential, and increasingly influential one reminding us of the centrality of this issue.

Second, I believe that “The Silenced Dialogue” represents a significant step forward because it explicitly rejects the “skills vs. process” dichotomy as a dialogical framework and replaces it with the much more risky and potentially fruitful examination of the previously silenced dialogue on the effects of a “culture of power” on instruction in schools (today there is a second, equally misguided dichotomy on everyone’s lips, whole language vs. phonics). To gather a second point of view on this issue, I asked for a response from John D’Auria, principal of a suburban Boston middle school where the student body is about 80% white, local students and 20% African-American students bussed daily from the city of Boston under a voluntary desegregation program. To me, D’Auria represents one of the types of readers Delpit hopes to reach and influence with her writing. He had this to say:

I think Delpit has framed a very important educational debate. In our dialogue about how best to educate children of color, we often take for granted how much being part of a middle class provides in the form of educational support. Teaching from that perspective does not take into account many of the “codes” that allow students to be successful in school. The silenced dialogue occurs because the language used is one that is learned by participants in the culture of power (those in the middle or upper classes). Those outside the culture do not fully understand all the nuances and contexts that provide understanding. Delpit argues that being told explicitly the rules of this language/culture makes acquiring power easier. She also notes that those with power are often least aware — or least willing to acknowledge — the existence of such a culture. It is the latter point that makes this chapter difficult to describe. The author comes tantalizingly close to breaking through so that some of the codes embedded in this culture of power can become more visible. Although the examples used do help bring some solid dimensions to this concept, it still remains out of reach, I think, to most casual middle class white readers. I do, however, applaud this work because it represents a span in a very important bridge that must be built in order for those in power to better understand what obstacles get in the way of learning when one lives outside the white middle class community.

Third, I believe the critique Delpit develops in these articles writing as an African-American woman can be extended more generally to situations involving Hispanic, Asian, and white working class students. For example, many of the classroom incidents Delpit frames in a black-white context have almost exact counterparts in situations involving poor and working class white students in classrooms of white middle class teachers. Here, too, there is a cultural gulf to be crossed if students are to be well taught. A white teacher, who works in a high school that is rapidly changing from a white working class student body to one where significant percentages of students are Asian and Hispanic, had this to say about “Controversies Revisited”:

It’s very provocative. It’s meant to provoke, to make you think, and that’s good. There are tremendous amounts of cultural misunderstanding happening in schools every day. But she talks as if there were no bureaucracy of schools, as if teachers were free agents with control over their curriculum, testing, materials, and schedules. I felt there was some teacher bashing here. She never talks about how school culture, class size, lack of resources make it hard to get to know students well enough to have the kind of sensitivity and personal knowledge of students that’s needed.
to address these issues. She also uses 'African American' and 'people of color' almost interchangeably in her arguments; I feel this shortchanges the frequently very different cultural realities of my Hispanic and Asian students. In the same vein, some of the descriptions of communication styles that she calls black — for example directness in speech, the need for teachers to be directive and clear — are exact descriptions of the styles of my poor, white students.

As I read on in the book, it became clear that the point of view of the earlier essays had broadened considerably from a black-white to a multicultural focus that was just as incisive but more inclusive in its scope. "Lessons from Home and Abroad" showcases Lisa Delpit, the working anthropologist and teacher educator, first turning her formidable observational and analytic skills on her experiences as outsider, or "other," in such far-flung settings as Papua New Guinea and Native Alaskan villages, then using the knowledge gained as a framework for looking at the mainland United States culture she reenters.

For example, the third essay in this section, "Teachers Voices: Rethinking Teacher Education for Diversity" uses as its starting point the twin realizations that "black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American children presently comprise almost 30 percent of the school-age population," and "the current number of teachers from nonwhite groups threatens to fall below 10 percent." In the essay, Delpit presents testimony gathered from nonwhite teachers about their experiences in teacher education programs. An African-American elementary teacher says, "My teacher education was just a joke. I did everything I was supposed to do, but they weren't impressed. I was just too confident and outspoken. So I said to myself: 'I guess I have to play their game.' I began to shuffle my feet; Lisa, I literally had to grin and bow. And then I got an A."

Another African-American woman says this about her cooperating teacher: "She thought all black children were poor, but the kids in that school weren't poor. She kept talking about how we couldn't expect too much from them because they were poor. She even thought I was poor. She kept asking me questions like, 'Is your father unemployed a lot?'

A Native Alaskan teacher complains about courses outside the education department which present a one-sided view, for example a history course. "Those history books just said, 'The Russians set up camp in Ruby' (an Alaskan village). Nowhere did they talk about how they killed natives for sport or stole women from their families and forced them to get married. My own Aunt was one of those women..."

I know of many teacher education programs, including my own, that are attempting to increase the number of minority students who enter. The stories in this essay suggest strongly that all of us should look hard, from the point of view of nonwhite students, at the attitudes, programmatic content, and quality of the experience they will encounter once they enroll.

What structural and attitudinal changes can we make, in increasingly diverse classrooms, to transform "the cultural clash between student and school" into authentic learning for all students?

The third section of the book, "Looking to the Future," builds on Delpit's earlier work to ask basic questions: how can teacher assessment become productively cross-cultural; how can teachers teach "literate discourse" effectively across boundaries of race, class, language, culture, and power; what structural and attitudinal changes can we make, in increasingly diverse classrooms, to transform "the cultural clash between student and school" into authentic learning for all students?

I found that in this section, my attention was drawn as much by how Delpit was making her points as it was by what she was saying. I felt that elements of her style that were strengths in other instances became limitations here. I am speaking, for example, of her reliance on one or two vividly told instances as the basis for large generalizations about how "white teachers" act or what "educators" should do; or prescriptions for action which assume individual classroom

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teachers are in charge of their own professional lives to a much greater extent than research and experience tell us that they are.

However, as I thought further, the instances I had first seen as "limitations" began to present themselves in a different light—as examples pointing towards a central difficulty or deep point for all of us engaged in this kind of work to think through. I am speaking of the difficulty surrounding acceptance of narrative, anecdotal, or personally-based speaking or writing as valid evidence or research. There is a great deal of highly valuable evidence about what is happening in schools that exists only in this form, and certainly it has a place in serious conversations about many aspects of education. But when is storytelling vital narrative evidence, and when is it just storytelling? When can it profitably be used, and how? By whom and in what contexts?

In an earlier essay, Delpit comments on the difficulties her students of color have encountered in having their narrative form of presentation taken seriously... "the university does not as a rule value personal narrative as having a legitimate cognitive function. Discourse in the university setting is more valued if it reflects independence of context, analysis, and objectification of experience."

Like others of Delpit's insights, the observations that she advances from a minority perspective can be extended to link up with and complement similar observations from other areas of education. In this instance, teacher researchers fighting for acceptance of their classroom-based studies, and practitioner-writers telling their own stories about school reform from their own classroom-eye viewpoint, are conspicuous examples. In both cases, an educational establishment comfortable with techniques that rely on "objectification of experience" has posed significant obstacles to the acceptance of narrative-based work by practitioners.

In conclusion, this is an essential book in its field, one that collects influential, previously scattered work published over the last ten years. Like many collections, it occasionally repeats itself. But this is a small price to pay for a book that is readable, direct, insightful, provocative, reality-based, and speaks to the increasingly large number of teachers and teacher-educators for whom diversity and equity are basic professional issues.